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Gender-based Violence in Monique Ilboudo's Fiction

The first published woman writer from the West African nation of Burkina Faso, former Minister for Human Rights in the Burkinabé government, then Ambassador and now Professor at the University of Ouagadougou, Monique Ilboudo has been largely overlooked by the academic world. Despite being awarded a national prize for publishing in her home country, Ilboudo's first novel, *Le Mal de peau* [Bad Skin], first published in 1992, has so far received very little attention outside Burkina Faso. Her second novel, *Murekatete*, written as part of the 1998 "Writing with a Duty to Memory" mission to Rwanda in commemoration of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi is discussed far less often than the other fictional outputs and is very difficult to obtain.¹

Moreover, the two novels are never analyzed together. Yet, Ilboudo's fiction offers new and interesting fictional interpretations of African women's issues, marked as it is by the author's professional interest in women's legal and human rights. Both novels present the responses of fictional characters to experiences of gender-based violence in Africa: colonial rape in *Le Mal de peau*; and genocide and marital rape in the Rwanda-based novel, *Murekatete*.

In each of Ilboudo's novels, a moment of violence plays a determining role in the ways in which the female protagonist functions in her relationships with others. For Cathy, the mixed-

¹ Ilboudo's lack of recognition as a writer of fiction can partly be explained by the unfavourable circumstances of publication for both of her novels. The lack of publishing infrastructure in Burkina Faso meant that *Le Mal de peau* was first published in 1992 by the Imprimerie Nationale du Burkina (Burkina National Printing Press) in Ouagadougou at the author's own expense. Ilboudo used the prize money she won for the best novel to fund the printing of a few thousand copies (in Joyce Hope Scott, "From Harlem to the African Sahel: The Trope of the Mulatto in Monique Ilboudo's *Le Mal de Peau* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," in *Camel Tracks: Critical Perspectives on Sahelian Literatures*, ed. Debra Boyd-Buggs and Joyce Hope Scott (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 250). She then had to wait almost ten years for the novel to be reprinted by French publisher, Le Serpent à plumes in 2001. *Murekatete* was co-published by Fest' Africa in Lille, France, and Le Figuier in Bamako, Mali.

race daughter of the rape victim, Sibila, rape is written on her body in the “bad skin” of the novel’s title, causing her to suffer racial discrimination in both a fictional African country and in France. As a rape victim, Cathy’s mother, Sibila is also the target of social rejection: having now lost her virginity, she is stigmatized as “a cracked jar” (49).² Realizing she no longer has value as a future bride, Sibila runs away from the marriage that had been arranged for her when she discovered that she was pregnant. She takes refuge in a convent but, once her pregnancy becomes apparent, is rejected by the nuns and sent to live in a community of widows. After several failed relationships with men, Sibila, now the mother of five children, eventually opts to live alone but here again her identity is stigmatized by the local community who refer to single women as “empty women” (170). Thus, both Sibila and her daughter’s identities are determined by the former’s experience of sexual violence.

In *Murekatete*, the eponymous narrator-protagonist’s near death at the hands of the Rwandan *interahamwe* militia leaves her traumatized and unable to consummate her marriage with the man who saved her. Although, like many women genocide survivors, Murekatete never speaks explicitly of sexual violence, her ensuing loss of libido implies that she was most likely a victim of rape. Furthermore, the *interahamwe* attack on Murekatete which opens the novel is depicted as an out-of-body experience (9), a sensation that Murekatete experiences again towards the end of the novel when she is raped by her husband, Venant (69).

African women’s bodies are at the center of Ilboudo’s fiction. Indeed, violations of female bodies are also used as fictional devices for examining other issues such as colonialism, racism and “métissage” [racial/cultural mixing]. This essay discusses the ways in which Ilboudo

² All translations are my own with page references to the original French texts.

represents other women's experiences of sexual assault and violence. It considers Ilboudo's fictional examinations of the legacy of violence for different categories of survivors: those who, like Murekatete, have experienced it first-hand and those who, like Cathy in *Le Mal de peau*, are the products of violent sexual (and in this case, colonial) violations.

My analysis of Ilboudo's writing starts from Susan Sontag's warning about the limits of authors' and readers' empathy in her essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. According to Sontag, assuming universal empathy is a very risky business: "No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain".³ Through my readings of *Le Mal de peau* and *Murekatete*, I consider Ilboudo's position as a writer in relation to the experiences she describes: is the author's relationship one of appropriation or solidarity? Can Ilboudo be charged with what Sontag describes as subsiding into a "we"? In other words, what are the ethical implications of Ilboudo's representations of other women's pain?

As a trained lawyer, former Minister for Human Rights and then Ambassador to the Nordic countries, Ilboudo is clearly used to speaking for and on behalf of others. Between 1992 and 1995 she wrote a weekly column about women's rights in the Burkinabé daily newspaper, *L'Observateur Paalga*. In 2001, she produced an illustrated short story on female genital mutilation, *Une histoire d'oeufs* [A Story about Eggs], published by UNESCO. Her most recent book, *Droit de cité: Etre femme au Burkina Faso* [Citizens' Rights: Being a Woman in Burkina Faso], published in 2006, also focuses on women's rights in her country of birth. In *Droit de cité*,

³ Susan Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), 6.

Ilboudo exposes the contradiction between the Burkinabé constitution that promotes equal rights for all its citizens and the existence of social and cultural practices that reinforce gender inequality. Many of these practices, in Ilboudo's analysis, represent forms of violence against women: "Gender-based violence is both cause and consequence of the legal inequality women experience in society".⁴ As well as acting as a spokeswoman, Ilboudo stresses the importance of allowing women to speak for themselves: "Isn't it up to those women who've been bold enough to venture into the implacable world of politics to worry about encouraging all the voiceless women to speak?".⁵ Ilboudo's sense of social responsibility in her professional life is reflected in a dominant concern with exploring women's issues in her fiction. Both her novels focus on gender-based violence and give fictional voice to various aspects of female oppression, some of which, such as marital rape, are rarely portrayed in African fiction.⁶

Ilboudo's first novel, *Le Mal de peau*, alternates the story of Cathy, a student from the fictional African nation of Tinga now studying architecture in Paris, with that of her mother, Sibila. At the age of seventeen, Sibila was raped by Cathy's father, a colonial Commandant. While Cathy herself is never the victim of physical or sexual violence, the pain she suffers can be read as the direct result of her mother's rape since she is doubly marginalized as both illegitimate and of mixed-race: "being the daughter of an unknown white father was the height of shame" (17). The stigma of a mixed-race parentage follows Cathy from Tinga to Paris where the parents of her white fiancé reject her as a potentially polluting agent: "'What?' his mother cried, choking.

⁴ Monique Ilboudo, *Droit de cité, être femme au Burkina Faso* (Montréal, Éditions du remue-ménage, 2006), 22.

⁵ Ilboudo, *Droit de cité*, 134.

⁶ The best-known example of an African novel discussing marital rape is Ama Ata Aidoo's 1991 novel, *Changes: A Love Story*.

‘You want to bring black blood into our family? That really takes the cake!’” (110). The concept of miscegenation as pollution can be traced back to slavery and was a common feature of nineteenth-century racist discourse in Europe and America.⁷ What Ilboudo’s novel highlights is not only the enduring nature of this myth but also its symmetrical nature. Just as Cathy is rejected by white Europeans as a contaminated “mixed blood” (109), so Sibila is forced to leave her family and her village after being “polluted” by the Commandant. When baby Cathy is born “white”, some suggest Sibila must have been inseminated by a supernatural being (92).

As the original act of violence, the rape of Sibila is key to understanding *Le Mal de peau*. However, the rape scene itself is extremely ambiguous because it is presented in two distinct and quite contradictory parts. In the first part, although he hesitates before raping his victim, the Commandant is portrayed as overcome with “an irresistible desire, a sadistic and immediate need to violate this defenseless body” (38). Unable to fight his “bestial instinct”, the Commandant pulls Sibila to the floor and rapes her “with a brutality that was equaled only by the violence of his desire” (38). Initially, then, the encounter is unequivocally presented as a violent rape with Sibila screaming before and afterwards in shock and in pain, but remaining silent and motionless in fear during the act itself. What immediately follows, however, is an extraordinary scene in which the Commandant, full of remorse, has sex with Sibila for a second time; this time, the text implies that she is consenting. Ilboudo writes: “When he felt she was ready to receive him, Mistah made love to her tenderly, respectfully. Just as he himself was about to climax he heard her moaning gently” (46). The troubling suggestion of mutual orgasm between the rapist

⁷ Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991), 20-22.

and his victim is then followed by a description that reads more like romantic fiction than the aftermath of sexual violence:

They remained lying on the hard ground for a long while, each of them lost in their own thoughts. The night was really beautiful. The moonlight wrapped the countryside in a milky light, making the shapes of things fuzzy and unreal. A gentle breeze brought from the river the sweet scent of water lilies. Mistah felt calmer now after that moment of shared pleasure. He was still horrified by his vile aggression, but he felt as if he had soothed his victim's pain, almost as if he had put a dressing on a wound for which he had been responsible. (46-47)

The confusion of rape and seduction in this pivotal scene is problematic since it causes the reader ultimately to question whether Sibila has been raped or not. For feminist critics, the way in which rape is represented is a critical issue, as outlined by Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver in the introduction to their groundbreaking collection of essays, *Rape and Representation*: “Whether in the courts or the media, whether in art or criticism, who gets to tell the story and whose story counts as ‘truth’ determine the definition of what rape *is*”.⁸ In presenting a rapist as a sympathetic, gentle man who wipes away Sibila's tears and strokes her hand before seducing her, Ilboudo effectively exonerates the perpetrator, diminishing the impact of the violent sexual

⁸ Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver. “Introduction: Rereading Rape,” in *Rape and Representation*, ed. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1.

assault we have just witnessed and inviting the reader to consider Sibila as somehow complicit in her own rape. This revisionist, patriarchal interpretation is reinforced later in the text when, through a series of coincidences, Cathy finally meets the Commandant Henri Lemerancier - her father - in Paris where, full of remorse, he confesses to his crime and offers to recognize her as his daughter (220-221). Cathy responds by inviting him to return with her to Tinga where, were it not for the plane being blown up by hijackers, the rapist and his victim, Sibila, would have been reunited as Cathy's parents (238).

In a 2001 interview in *Amina* magazine, Renée Mendy-Ongoundou questioned Ilboudo about the ambiguity of the rape scene in *Le Mal de peau*. Ilboudo responded by explaining the parallel she makes in the novel between the rape of Sibila and the violence of European colonization of Africa. As Joyce Hope Scott writes in one of the rare academic studies of this novel:

For Ilboudo, the mulatto [in *Le Mal de peau*] is a representation of the rape exploitation of Africa and the alienation and fragmentation of the African sensibility as a result of the cultural metissage imposed on them through colonial conquest and the post-colonial socio-economic and educational legacy.⁹

Scott's focus on the figure of the mulatto does not extend to a discussion of Ilboudo's representation of rape but her reading of the metaphor certainly concurs with Ilboudo's own reading of her novel. In Ilboudo's view, the rape scene is not compromised by what follows

⁹ Scott, "From Harlem to the African Sahel", 253.

because the two episodes are separate and distinct. What she wants to emphasize, she explains, is the possibility of a different kind of relationship between Europe and Africa in which Africans come to terms with their past and Europeans recognize their crimes.¹⁰ While Ilboudo's comments on the metaphorical function of the ambiguous rape scene go some way towards explaining the author's intention in writing *Le Mal de peau*, the now commonplace use of rape as a metaphor for understanding the violence of the colonial conquest has been "challenged by feminists for perpetuating the view of women's bodies as a resource, property or guarded secret belonging to men".¹¹ Moreover, what Ilboudo fails to acknowledge is the way in which both the metaphorical application of the rape and her decision to confuse sexual violence with seduction effectively silence the female victim and minimize her pain. Indeed, the ambiguity with which Ilboudo treats her fictional rape victim is compounded when, reflecting afterwards on what has happened, Sibila thinks she must have deserved such a punishment for going down to the forbidden lake after sunset. She concludes that she is not angry with the Commandant for having raped her as in doing so he has effectively convinced her that she should flee her impending arranged marriage to a much older polygamous man in a neighboring village (49).

The victim in Ilboudo's second novel, *Murekatete*, is treated very differently. Left for dead by the *interahamwe* on the side of the road after witnessing the brutal death of both her children, the eponymous narrator presents herself as one of the living dead: "I have been dead", she declares, "For a very long time" (10). Although "dead" herself, Murekatete's memory of the

¹⁰ Renée Mendy-Ongoundou, "Monique Ilboudou. 'Le Mal de Peau', une histoire africaine..." *Amina* 383 (2001): 100.

¹¹ Zoë Brigley Thompson and Sorchia Gunne, "Feminism Without Borders: The Potentials and Pitfalls of Re-theorizing Rape" in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives*, ed. Zoë Brigley Thompson and Sorchia Gune (New York: Routledge, 2010), 2.

violence is presented as very much alive in the form of a recurring nightmare from which she regularly awakes in a fit of lugubrious laughter. Like Cathy in *Le Mal de peau*, Murekatete also has the moment of violence written on her body, this time in the form of visible scars, her mutilated body signifying the gendered nature of the violence perpetrated against Tutsi women in 1994.¹² When her bandages are removed in hospital and she sees her face in a mirror, she decides to “give up on life” (48), mourning the loss of a beauty she had never had cause to think about before. Through the figure of Murekatete, Ilboudo shows how violence impacts on a woman’s femininity: not only is she no longer beautiful but also, she is unable to express physically her love for her new husband, Venant.

Venant is the Rwandan Patriotic Front soldier who saves Murekatete. Himself a survivor of the 1959 Tutsi massacres in Rwanda, he is initially portrayed as the ideal husband, patient with his wife’s nightmares and her refusal to have sex with him, and keen to help her come to terms with the trauma she has experienced. However, through the first-person narration of Murekatete, the novel traces the gradual disintegration of the couple’s marriage, culminating in Venant, drunk on whisky, violently raping his wife and infecting her with HIV. Murekatete wakes the next day in a pile of her own vomit, “soiled to the very bottom of her soul” (70). To a certain extent, Venant’s rape of Murekatete signals the difficult status of women genocide survivors in Rwanda and the stigmatization of survivors of sexual violence. Murekatete comments, “I feel more and more strongly that Venant blames me for something but I don’t

¹² For an analysis of the role of gender in the Genocide against the Tutsi, see Christopher Taylor, “A Gendered Genocide: Tutsi Women and Hutu Extremists in the 1994 Rwanda Genocide,” *Political and Legal Anthropological Review* 22.1 (1999): 42-54.

know what, that he's imperceptibly pushing me into the torturers' camp, and that his gruesome stories are meant to make me pay" (68).

Whereas the description of the rape in *Le Mal de peau* slides quickly into the discourse of romantic fiction, in *Murekatete*, the marital rape is presented in stark, horrific detail with Venant laughing maniacally while he tears off Murekatete's clothes, all the time holding her hands above her head. As her husband pushes her down onto the bed, the narrator feels like she is being suffocated: "I start gasping for breath like a drowned woman saved at the very last minute" (69). Here, the ironic reference to being saved reminds the reader of just how far Murekatete's "mysterious savior" (48) has fallen. When she starts to scream, Venant tells her, "You can scream as much as you like. No one will come. I'm your husband, damn it! And you know what husbands do to their wives?" (69). During penetration, Murekatete remains motionless, like Sibila in *Le Mal de peau*, adopting the characteristic "tonic immobility"¹³ of the rape victim: "I was paralyzed. I was no longer screaming, I was no longer moving. I saw him going at my body with the feeling that it wasn't mine" (69). Afterwards, Venant is so ashamed of what he has done that he leaves the marital home never to return. Like the Commandant in *Le Mal de peau*, Venant recognizes his crime but whereas the Commandant mutters a brief apology in a language Sibila does not understand (47), Venant sends his wife a letter: "I am a vile beast", he writes, "and nothing, no alcohol, no drugs could justify my behavior. I am a criminal, Tèta" (71).

Through her brutal description of the sexual act followed by Venant's identification of himself as a criminal, Ilboudo articulates the concept of marital rape, an act of writing that, as

¹³ Jane Monckton-Smith, *Relating Rape and Murder* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 36.

Nada Elia writes in her analysis of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*, "is critical to the conscious development of African feminism, as it allows for a woman's realization of her rightful ownership of her body under any and all circumstances".¹⁴ For Rwandan critic Josias Semujanga, Venant's rape of Murekatete serves a symbolic function in the novel, representing the extent to which evil has permeated Rwandan society. However, as Semujanga's own analysis goes on to demonstrate, Ilboudo's genocide novel is more concerned with promoting human rights than with narrative strategies.¹⁵ While the figurative function of the rape is important as a comment on post-genocide Rwanda, Ilboudo's decision to realistically portray a rape within a marriage reflects her political concern with exposing and challenging gender-based violence in Africa. Similarly, although the ambiguity of the rape in *Le Mal de Peau* is problematic insofar as it appears to diminish the traumatic experience of the victim, Ilboudo's insistence on the Commandant acknowledging his crime can be read as an attempt to make visible the reality of European economic and cultural exploitation of Africa and Africans even if, in this case, the representation is compromised.

Whereas in her first novel, the experience of the victim is secondary to the metaphorical function of the rape, in *Murekatete* Ilboudo places the emphasis on the subjectivity of her eponymous victim, a strategy supported by her use of a first-person narrative as opposed to the "neutral" third person in *Le Mal de peau*. This shift in narrative voice facilitates reader empathy but also complicates Ilboudo's own relationship with her text, particularly because the voice of Ilboudo sometimes breaks through the first-person narrative. For example, after visiting the

¹⁴ Nada Elia, "'To Be an African Working Woman': Levels of Feminist Consciousness in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*," *Research in African Literatures* 30.2 (1999): 141.

¹⁵ Josias Semujanga, *Le Génocide, sujet de fiction? Analyse des récits du massacre des Tutsi dans la littérature africaine* (Montreal: Nota Bene, 2008), 217.

genocide site at what used to be the Murambi technical school, the narrator notes, “Murambi deeply disturbed my faith in humanity. Are human beings really capable of that?” (60). Writing about this scene, Chantal Kalisa rightly challenges the legitimacy of Ilboudo’s narrative voice:

Having experienced and witnessed the killings of people including her own children, Murekatete would hardly make such a declaration. Instead, here we see Ilboudo the writer-witness who traveled to post-genocide Rwanda and in the process of writing her experience identifies completely with the fictive victim/witness she has created.¹⁶

As Kalisa explains, Ilboudo is “writing her experience”, transferring her own emotional response to that of her fictional protagonist-narrator.

While the blurring of narrator and character’s voice is a common feature of African storytelling, it is important to consider the ethical implications of this kind of narratorial slippage in a text about the genocide in Rwanda. Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg reminds us that, “fictionalizing historical atrocities necessitates attention to the ethical claims originating from the experiences of victims and survivors of historical atrocities”.¹⁷ By merging her authorial voice with that of a fictional survivor of genocide, Ilboudo is stretching the limits of empathy and effectively speaking for survivors. Her decision to project onto her protagonist her personal experience of visiting a Rwandan genocide memorial is ethically problematic because her own

¹⁶ Chantal Kalisa, *Violence in Francophone African and Caribbean Women’s Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 183.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, *Beyond Terror: Gender, Narrative, Human Rights* (Bruswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 16.

relationship with the memorial and the events it commemorates is fundamentally different from that of the survivors Murekatete represents.

Although Ilboudo's narrative sometimes demonstrates an inability to separate her authorial self from the fictional voice she has created, at the same time there is evidence in the text of the author's awareness of her position as a genocide tourist in Rwanda.¹⁸ Her implied self-criticism suggests a degree of sensitivity to the question of representing others' pain that is less apparent in *Le Mal de peau*. This contrast between the two novels can partly be explained by the different ways the author decides to position herself in relation to the contexts she describes. While in each text, Ilboudo chooses to represent acts of violence against women that she herself has not endured, in *Murekatete* she nonetheless draws on her personal experience as a witness of the afterlife of violence in Rwanda.

Through empathic identification, Ilboudo also emphasizes the agency of the women characters in her novels. Although both are victims of gender-based violence, Murekatete and Sibila are also presented very much as survivors. While Semujanga argues that Murekatete's name, which, in his translation of the Kinyarwanda, means "let her live as a spoiled child",¹⁹ contradicts the narrator's life experience, I suggest that it should be read as part of Ilboudo's representation of her fictional protagonists as resilient survivors, symbolized in the novel in moments of rebirth.²⁰ Murekatete was still-born but her mother had taken so long to conceive a child that she refused to accept her daughter's death and so spent the whole night breathing life

¹⁸ Nicki Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories: Fiction After 1994* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 66-67.

¹⁹ Semujanga, *Le Génocide, sujet de fiction?*, 185

²⁰ The name is explained in the novel as "let her live" or "let her feel at ease" (12) thus offering a slightly different translation from the one Semujanga provides.

into her baby until Murekatete had her “first resurrection” (12). The second rebirth occurs when the narrator is brought back from the dead by her future husband, Venant, “the craftsman of resurrection” (72).

Having twice returned from the dead, Murekatete is finally unable to survive the death of the love between her and Venant, lamenting, “I will never recover from that death” (72). While she is ultimately destroyed by what she has experienced, Murekatete’s story is, for the most part, one of resilience. The same is true of Sibila in *Le Mal de peau* who also undergoes a kind of “resurrection” when she renames herself Madeleine (123) and who, as Scott notes, becomes a financially successful, independent head of her own household despite being a “marked woman”. Here, Sibila’s decision to baptize herself with a Western, Christian name forms an interesting echo of her ambiguous participation in the colonial rape. For Scott, however, this rebirthing positions Sibila as a feminist heroine who refuses to accept pre-determined social roles.²¹

Although Scott’s reading of *Le Mal de peau* as a feminist text overlooks the troubling nature of Sibila’s colonial seduction, her conclusion that Ilboudo is a feminist writer is convincing. Indeed, as a women’s and human rights campaigner, Ilboudo has also been labeled a feminist by some of her compatriots, as Scott explains:

In the decidedly traditional society of Burkina Faso, her [Ilboudo’s] outspokenness has not failed to draw sharp criticism and sound reprimand from her male elders and

²¹ Joyce Hope Scott, “Daughter of Yennenga: *Le Mal de peau* and Feminine Voice in the Literature of Burkina Faso,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 25.3-4 (1997): 89.

contemporaries and even some women who wonder if Ilboudo's brand of feminism is not just a bit too Western.²²

For these male contemporaries, Ilboudo speaks with a voice that is not always appropriate to the women she represents. The rejection of Ilboudo's feminism as "too Western" is a familiar criticism made of African feminism and one that has been echoed in the writings of postcolonial women critics such as Chandra Mohanty who condemns what she calls Western feminism's "discursive colonization of Third World women's lives and struggles".²³ Moreover, in charging Ilboudo with being too Western a feminist, her critics take us back to the question we began with in exploring her novels, which is that of her authorial relationship with representations of other women's pain. Ilboudo writes from a position that, to a certain extent, places her outside the experiences she describes; she nonetheless writes from a position of empathy and solidarity with other African women. As such, *Le Mal de peau* and *Murekatete* can be read as examples of the strategy for global social justice Mohanty advocates in her recent book, *Feminism Without Borders*: "I believe", Mohanty writes, "that [an] experiential and analytic anchor in the lives of marginalized communities of women provides the most inclusive paradigm for thinking about social justice. This particularized viewing allows for a more concrete and expansive vision of universal justice".²⁴ Ilboudo encourages us to think in a more expansive way about social justice in the world by taking African victims of gender-based violence as starting point for her fiction.

²² Scott, "Daughter of Yennenga", 83.

²³ Chandra Mohanty *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 222.

²⁴ Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, 231.

Although, as this essay has shown, there are some problems with Ilboudo's narratives in terms of the ethics of representation, there is nevertheless an evolution through her two novels from a reductive and potentially exploitative use of rape as a metaphor for the violence of colonization in *Le Mal de peau* to a more self-conscious reflection on gender-based violence in *Murekatete*. This shift is also reflected in the different endings of the two novels. *Le Mal de peau* ends perhaps unsurprisingly with ambiguity, as the hijacked plane carrying Cathy and her rapist father back to Tinga explodes in the sky, leaving Sibila (now Madeleine) silently mourning the loss of her daughter. Of course, the accident means that the reunion between the rapist and his victim never happens, perhaps suggesting the undesirability of such an encounter or, to return to Ilboudo's rape metaphor, the impossibility of a fruitful union between Africa and its former colonizers.

In *Murekatete*, the ending is also pessimistic as far as the eponymous narrator is concerned because Ilboudo depicts her alone, sometimes suicidal, and dying of AIDS. However, the final scene of the novel presents a contrast to this pessimism when Murekatete overhears a conversation between Aloys, a Hutu man, and Soline, a Tutsi woman, both of whom can be identified as survivors of the 1994 genocide. Aloys has lost his right leg after it was sliced by the *interahamwe* when he refused to join in their "work". Soline was gang raped by the militia who afterwards inserted a bottle of acid into her vagina: "I'm no longer a woman" (73), she told Aloys when the lovers were reunited after the genocide. Like Murekatete, Soline feels that her femininity has been destroyed by sexual violence. Ilboudo uses the Hutu/Tutsi couple to make a comparison between wounded bodies and the violated country (74). Yet, if the couple represent post-genocide Rwanda with its scars and its uncertain future, the final line suggests hope for both

survivors and the nation with Aloys and Soline gazing together at the sky, filled with love and dreams (75).

Despite their ambiguities, Ilboudo's novels make a valuable contribution to contemporary African women's writing in two important ways: firstly, by articulating acts of gender-based violence that are often unacknowledged or taboo, *Le Mal de peau* and *Murekatete* put African women's issues on the agenda; and secondly, by choosing to emphasize in her novels women as survivors – of colonial rape, marital rape, and crimes of genocide, Ilboudo challenges the myths about African women as passive victims created by colonialism and patriarchy.

As Hervé Tchumkam concludes in his analysis of *Le Mal de peau*, Ilboudo's fiction "places women as subjects of power and, at the same time, moves away from the image of woman as object in Africa".²⁵ Moreover, the fact that Ilboudo's novels invite readers to imagine acts of gendered violence in Africa under African eyes complicates the criticisms I have made of her ethics of representation. However problematic some of the fictional representations of African women's suffering may be, Ilboudo is nonetheless ever present as the Burkinabé producer of her texts. Indeed, as we have seen, the author's presence is palpable in *Murekatete*'s narration, suggesting not only authorial empathy but also solidarity with the experiences Ilboudo describes. While the representation of Sibila's seduction in *Le Mal de peau* can be read as a possible failure to empathize with an imagined victim of sexual violence, at the same time, the text's promotion of Sibila as a resilient survivor suggests an emphasis on recovery and agency rather than objectification and pain.

²⁵ Hervé Tchumkam, "Entre sexe et peau: tribulations de femmes chez Monique Ilboudo," *Nouvelles Etudes Francophones* 27.2 (2012): 180.

What emerges from Ilboudo's novels is a promotion of the strength of women to survive even the most unimaginable violations and a degree of commonality between experiences of gender-based violence across different nations (real and imagined) and at different times. As Mohanty writes,

In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully.²⁶

It is the connections between the local and the universal that inform Ilboudo's work as both writer of fiction and human rights campaigner. Just as she presents herself as a citizen of Burkina Faso, so Ilboudo also identifies herself as a citizen of the world.²⁷ If then, to return to Susan Sontag, there is a "we" in Ilboudo's novels, it indicates first and foremost the women of Africa with all the differences and commonalities such a designation implies. Beyond this "we", however, lies an implied solidarity with women survivors of violence everywhere. Although the acts of violence Ilboudo describes can be read as particular to a specific historical period (colonialism) or a specific nation (Rwanda), her writing about gender-based violence in Africa makes important transnational connections with the experiences of women all over the world.

²⁶ Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, 226.

²⁷ Ilboudo, *Droit de cité*, 11.

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